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PRESS RELEASE

EARTH SUMMIT

UN CONFERENCE ON HIGH-SEAS FISHING CONCLUDES WITH LIMITED PROGRESS

NEW YORK, 29 July -- A United Nations meeting called to resolve international tensions over high-seas fishing will conclude tomorrow with some consensus on principles but slow progress made on the most contentious issues. Negotiations are tentatively set to resume at a March 1994 session, and are expected to conclude at a final meeting in August 1994.

At a press conference today, Mr. Satya Nandan of Fiji, the Chairman of the meeting, summarized the problem as one of "too many vessels catching fewer and fewer fish."

According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), virtually every commercial species of fish has been "depleted," "fully exploited," or "overexploited," while the size of the world's fishing fleets, heavily subsidized by Governments, has increased at twice the rate of the size of the total catch. The total world catch of fish has been declining annually.

The UN meeting -- officially titled the United Nations Conference on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks -- was called for at the Earth Summit in Brazil. It was the first major effort to regulate high-seas fishing since the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea was opened for signature in 1982. The current talks are an attempt to build on the fisheries provisions of the Law of the Sea treaty, which still remains 4 short of the 60 countries needed to ratify it before it can enter into force.

The Conference has focused on the conflicts between coastal states -- which have exclusive rights to fish within 200 miles of their shores -- and states which maintain fishing fleets on the high seas. Because some fish, such as cod off Canada's eastern coast or pollack in the Bering Sea, straddle the boundaries of the 200-mile zones, and others, such as tuna and swordfish, migrate over wide areas, some coastal states protest that increasing catches of these fish on the high seas reduce their own catches within their territorial waters.

Canada has declared a moratorium on cod fishing off its Atlantic coast until stocks regenerate, putting between 20,000 and 30,000 fishermen out of

work. Iceland has cut back its domestic fishing by 50 per cent because stocks are depleted. Yet unregulated foreign fleets continue to fish just off these countries' boundaries. Some Governments have acknowledged that inadequate domestic management has also contributed to the crisis.

A small group of key coastal states -- led by Argentina, Canada, Chile, Iceland and New Zealand -- put forward a draft legal treaty early in the three-week Conference. However, there is strong opposition to a legally binding agreement by countries with large-scale high-seas fleets.

According to the FAO, six countries account for 90 per cent of "distant-water" fishing. These are the former USSR, Japan, Spain, Poland, the Republic of Korea, and Taiwan, province of China. The United States does a significant amount of high-seas fishing, especially for tuna.

Mr. Nandan acknowledged that the conflict between coastal and distant-water fishing states was far from being resolved, but said progress had been made on some underlying principles. There was a consensus that there was "no unlimited freedom to fish on the high seas," that "the duty to conserve was paramount." Some agreement had been reached on the issue of data collection, and on settlement of fishing disputes, which would be resolved through regional fishing bodies, under global guidelines. He planned to issue a Chairman's draft at the close of the meeting which would serve as the basis for future negotiations.

Some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that attended the Conference as observers, as well as Government delegates from seriously affected countries, expressed disappointment at the lack of concrete results, considering the urgency of the problem. Mr. Nandan replied that there had been some unrealistic expectations that agreement could be reached during the three-week meeting. Because these are "very delicate" issues involving national sovereignty, "it is not going to be easy; the process will be slow," he said.

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